GUEST EDITORIAL

HISTORY OF HYPNOTISM IN EUROPE AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PLACE

Since the 1990s a number of studies, such as Alan Gauld’s *A history of hypnotism*, Alison Winter’s *Mesmerized*, Daniel Pick’s *Svengali’s web*, Andreas Mayer’s *Sites of the unconscious* and, most recently, William Hughes’ *That devil’s trick*, have elucidated the scientific as well as the popular cultures in which mesmeric and hypnotic practices thrived in the nineteenth century. By the end of the nineteenth century – that is, the time on which the articles of this special issue focus – hypnotism was a common topic of medical, legal and public debate in several European countries. The therapeutic potential of hypnotic suggestion was balanced against the dangers of a mental state that made the individual a seemingly powerless subject of the hypnotizer’s will and commands. Risks to individual and collective mental health, of sexual abuse of hypnotized persons, and of criminal suggestions were widely invoked whenever hypnotism was discussed. The ‘magnetic’ treatments by lay healers and the popular performances by stage hypnotists such as Donato (Alfred Edouard D’Hont) and Carl Hansen, who toured Europe, caused political concerns about public health and public order, leading to calls for the banning of hypnotic practices or for restricting their use to qualified medical men. Indeed, hypnotism appears to have been a practice around which a number of acute popular anxieties coalesced during the nineteenth century, including fears related to psychological contagion, crowds, race, class and gender.

In the scientific discourse, the pendulum of opinion had begun to swing from Jean-Martin Charcot’s school at the Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris, which interpreted hypnosis as an induced pathological state of the nervous system, to Hippolyte Bernheim’s school at the University of Nancy, which saw it as a psychological state resulting from suggestion. In some instances, however, the idea of pathology was hard to dispel, often surviving as part of a dual model of hypnosis that could be used to promote the therapeutic benefits of medical hypnosis while simultaneously warning of the profound dangers of lay practice in this field. When not engaged in the defence or promotion of their particular theory of hypnosis, both schools and their supporters across Europe also fought a rearguard action against their pre-scientific past, seeking to establish what separated hypnotism from animal magnetism.

The six articles of this issue delve into the various conflicts highlighted by the wide-ranging debates around and responses to hypnotism. Above all, they give us the opportunity to consider the significance of ‘place’ in the historical hypnotism debates. We mean this in two regards. First, there has so far been relatively little research on these debates in Spain and Italy, and – with the exception of the contributions of Joseph Delbœuf – in Belgium. To use the vocabulary of the ‘spatial turn’ in the humanities, these debates allow us to follow processes of dissemination from the two rival centres of hypnotism, Paris and Nancy, to the ‘periphery’. Of course, disseminators and propagators of hypnotism have been known before, especially through the long list of visitors to the
French centres, including later luminaries such as Sigmund Freud, August Forel and Eugen Bleuler. It is also a well-known fact, for example, that Freud translated Bernheim’s book on suggestion and its therapeutic applications into German, as well as Charcot’s lectures on the diseases of the nervous system; and that the Berlin physician Albert Moll, with his successful monograph Der Hypnotismus (1889), which was almost immediately translated into English, further helped to disseminate internationally the views of the school of Nancy.

However, we need more detailed studies on how transnational references worked in local contexts: Kaat Wils, in her discussion of the Belgian parliamentary debates on a ban of public performances of hypnotism, makes a relevant start in this respect, highlighting the influence of Charcot and of the Nancy jurist Jules Liégeois in the discussions on the medical and social dangers of hypnosis, respectively. Andrea Graus observes in her article that Bernheim’s therapeutic approach made his hypnotism more attractive to physicians in Spain than Charcot’s experimental orientation towards the subject. Maria Teresa Brancaccio traces in her paper the influence of both the Salpêtrière and the Nancy School on the Italian psychiatric discourse on hypnotism, and describes the ensuing controversies, which ended in a demise of interest in the subject in Italy by the beginning of the 1890s.

We should be cautious, however, in understanding such processes just as selective diffusion from centre to periphery. The flow could also go in the opposite direction, as Emese Lafferton has shown in a recent study of a case in Hungary, where a young, female subject had collapsed and died during a hypnotic and spiritualist demonstration, causing Europe-wide discussions about the dangers of the method. Similarly, Heather Wolffram notes in her article that the trial of the magnetic healer Czeslaw Czynski in Munich attracted attention as far away as the United States and New Zealand.

The papers of this special issue also show the significance of ‘place’ in a second, wider and, we think, even more interesting sense: namely, the importance of the social place in which hypnosis was carried out for the moral and epistemological assessment of the practice. A common theme of the papers presented here is the relationship between lay and medical practices of hypnotism and, simultaneously, the efforts to demarcate the two realms from each other. While not all the articles specifically use the language of boundary-work, many of them examine the process by which the proponents of hypnotism in various countries engaged in the creation of professional and epistemological geographies intended both to include and to exclude. In the wider historiography, this interest on the part of physicians in distinguishing their use of hypnosis from that of lay ‘magnetizers’, stage performers and spiritualists has been interpreted as a wish to establish a medical monopoly in hypnotic practice. However, this interpretation may be too narrow. The papers by Wils and Brancaccio, on Belgium and Italy respectively, mention contacts between Donato and medical men; and there were other such links, for example between the Danish stage hypnotist Hansen and the Breslau professor of physiology, Rudolf Heidenhain. Moreover, there were scholars who approached hypnotism as philosopher-psychologists, such as Delbœuf in Liège and Max Dessoir in Berlin.

The problem was, however, one of trust, depending on the social space where hypnosis was practised. This is clearly brought out by Andrea Graus’s article on Spain, where doctors keen to learn about hypnotic techniques attended demonstrations by itinerant magnetizers but simultaneously felt it necessary to display their indignation about what they saw in order to preserve their medical reputation. In the same vein, as Kim Hajek emphasizes in her paper, leading researchers of the Paris and Nancy Schools of hypnotism
insisted that what they did was experimental science, far removed from the ‘wondrous’ interventions of Franz Anton Mesmer and his followers in the early nineteenth century.

The connection between social place and trust is further brought out by Heather Wolffram’s and Andreas-Holger Maehle’s articles on Germany. Controversies existed over the authenticity of criminal suggestions which were acted out by subjects in the setting of the clinical laboratory or during academic demonstrations. When hypnotism entered the courtroom, as in the Czynski trial, the epistemological stakes were set even higher. Czynski’s defence lawyer, Max Bernstein, not only skilfully exploited the differences and contradictions in the statements of the six expert witnesses – something that any good lawyer would have done – but he also appealed to the jury as gatekeepers who would decide whether hypnotism was a phenomenon that merited consideration in the legal system. The verdict, finding Czynski guilty of fraud and forgery, but not of having hypnotized his patient, the Baroness Hedwig von Zedlitz, into sexual compliance, reflected the higher standards of evidence that were required in court. Other court cases where hypnotism was involved, such as the rape trial against the lay magnetizer Carl Mainone in Cologne, had a similar outcome. As Maehle points out, the legal authorities were reluctant to believe in the powers of hypnotic manipulation and in the statements of victims about what happened to them while they were in a hypnotic state.

Moreover, medical critics, such as professors Moritz Benedikt in Vienna and Friedrich Fuchs in Bonn, suspected that many patients or subjects simulated, or at least exaggerated, the effects of hypnosis in therapeutic as well as experimental settings. Here too then, in the consulting room or laboratory, the dynamics of social place and trust were at play. The practice and experience of hypnotism in such settings was shaped by complex social interactions between doctors and patients, and experimenters and subjects, where trust was crucial on both sides, but might be broken either to maintain or to terminate these relationships. Hypnotic patients and subjects, it seems, simulated cures and effects in some cases to please their physicians and in others to escape further awkward clinical or experimental interactions.

If, even in the highly controlled environment of the courtroom, consulting room or laboratory, the practice of hypnotism might be a cause for concern, what then of less regulated places such as the home, the street and the theatre? How could the abuse of the public’s trust be prevented in these places where hypnotism was quite regularly performed and often for profit? The politics of what might be called ‘appropriate place’ as concerned hypnosis, closely connected with the issue of ‘appropriate practitioners’, did become a focus of government regulation in a number of European countries in the late nineteenth century. Parliamentary committees and a variety of official health bodies, as the papers by Maehle, Brancaccio and Wils demonstrate, pursued inquiries into both the usefulness and the dangerousness of hypnotism, in some cases contemplating bans on its public or medical practice, but in others coming to the conclusion that the putative dangers were more imagined than real.

Issuing from the imaginary, of course, was another realm in which hypnotism took place: that of fiction. Offering convincing simulacra of the social places already discussed, novels and stories reproduced and exaggerated the debates and anxieties that circulated about hypnosis in nineteenth-century Europe. While Wolffram mentions the coincidence of Trilby’s publication in the same year as the Czynski trial, offering a lens through which the public might choose to view the unfolding courtroom drama around the lay hypnotist and the baroness, it is Hajek’s contribution that more fully points to fiction as a
significant place for debate and boundary-work around hypnotism. Mobilizing a story by Anatole France, entitled ‘Monsieur Pigeonneau’, she demonstrates the manner in which French researchers’ demarcation strategies constrained the scope of their theoretical speculation about hypnotism. In addition, as the work of Stefan Andriopoulos, in particular, has shown, fiction about hypnotism was not simply an interesting cultural artefact of medical and legal debates in the real world, seeking to educate the public about its potential and its danger, but played an active role in such disputes, in some instances operating in lieu of genuine case studies and evidence. The distinction between real and imagined sites of hypnosis was, as this suggests, more complex than it might first appear.

The social place, then, in which hypnotism was debated had a profound effect on its status. While people amused themselves at the stage shows of itinerant hypnotists and may have been inclined to believe in the reality of the astonishing phenomena that were exhibited, matters became serious in the courtroom and in critical medical debate, and doubts about the effects of hypnosis came to the fore. Both hypnotic entertainment and serious debate about criminal suggestion might also be experienced in the fictional realm, which did not simply reflect but often exacerbated and distorted cultural and medical anxieties around hypnosis in such a way that they affected action in the real world.

The articles of this special issue, with their emphasis on both geographic and social ‘place’, therefore invite us to reflect on the significance of this concept in the historical analysis of the phenomenon of hypnotism. Some philosophers today, influenced by the existentialism of Heidegger and others, have begun to speak of ‘situated cognition’ – the dependence of how we think and evaluate on the place where we do this. The history of hypnotism gives us, we think, ample opportunity to consider this phenomenon.

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NOTES


Our use of the term ‘transnational’ acknowledges the operation of hypnotism across national borders and the reliance of practitioners and theoreticians on the experience and authority of those in other countries, but does not seek to suggest that the reception and use of hypnotism was the same in each place. Hypnotism was both transferred and transformed as it crossed national and regional boundaries.


On the concept of boundary-work, see T. Gieryn, Cultural boundaries of science: credibility on the line (University of Chicago Press, 1999).


Mayer, op. cit. (note 1), pp. 97–103; M. Dessoir, Das Doppel-Ich (Ernst Günters Verlag, Leipzig, 1890).

